

The Best And The Worst

A sermon by Pr. David Johnson

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way..."

So begins Charles Dickens' 1859 historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*; a story set before and during the French Revolution. It was a story written in classic Dickens fashion; where the horrors of everyday life are contrasted with the intangible ideals of the soul. In this tale we see the truths of resurrection and transformation, juxtaposed with the stark realities prison, an abusive aristocracy, and the rising French Revolution.

With this in mind, you could easily peek back to the times of Jerusalem and Rome, of Tiberius (*and his puppet king, Herod*) and Caiaphas. It was a dark culture of oppression and hard labor. There were two forces to confront; the church and its legalistic hierarchy on one side, and the powerful forces of Roman dictatorship on the other. Mercy was hard to find on either side.

But then Jesus arrived, bringing hope where there was none, and compassion to a people long in need of relief. He spoke of mercy in a time of civil and religious condescension, and of forgiveness when people had only known a cold and twisted justice. It was easy to see why many sought to promote Jesus and declare their loyalty to Him. After all, He was a man of the "people," the deliverer of the downtrodden. He would rescue the people who deserved it, and restore the nation of Israel back to the glory days of King David. Yes, it was *"the best of times and the worst of times... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."* But Jesus would change all that. Or would He?

As we move through the pages of John's gospel, we quickly see a Jesus who is more concerned with personal pain rather than maintaining cultural paradigms. He reaches out to people in need, rather than following some prescribed formula. And Jesus definitely wasn't concerned with the social, religious, or gender status of those before Him. Just read, John 3 and 4.

John 3 begins with Jesus being visited by a most unlikely man. Nicodemus, a Pharisee (*a ruler of the Jews – maybe part of the Sanhedrin no less*), shows up on Jesus' doorstep under the cover of darkness. But why? Who would blame Jesus for interacting with the right kind of person, from the right side of the tracks. After all, he was a high-ranking official, serving in the church establishment. But Nicodemus wasn't there to correct or challenge Jesus; he was curious.

John 3:1-3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

"We know you're a godly messenger, for no one can deny the power of your ministry." Nicodemus is truly impressed and hungry. He wants to know if Jesus is legit. He wants to understand, and doesn't want to miss something that is sincerely divine. But he is cautious.

"The fact that Nicodemus came "at night" was, of course, due to fear lest he be seen, and thus his standing be compromised. Yet this is not cowardice but rather careful caution, for, although Jesus had made an impression on Nicodemus, the man was not sure about this young Rabbi from Galilee who might turn out a disappointment after all. So he cautiously investigates. The fact that Nicodemus "came to him," taking the risk involved, shows his seriousness, shows how deeply Jesus had gripped his heart." - Lenski

"...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." This would have been confusing for Nicodemus, after all, what he came for was information; clarification. He had already come far in his faith, in his profession. He simply needed to understand, to know what Jesus was all about.

But Jesus was telling him he had to start all over. He had to begin again, be born-again. If Nicodemus truly wanted to see what he came to see, whether Jesus was the Messiah or not, he would not comprehend it from his current perspective. He would have to come at The Kingdom from a completely new outlook, from a transformed worldview.

From that beginning stemmed the whole conversation of new birth; of a new life beginning with baptism and the Holy Spirit.

John 3:5-8 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (*see also Ezek 36:25-27; Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5*)

Nicodemus is still a bit perplexed, but Jesus presses on. He explains to this lofty religious leader that the answers he longs for are not achieved by status or learning, but in a new beginning with God. The fact that Nicodemus struggled to understand even brought a little chuckle to Jesus' heart:

John 3:10-12 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

It is from this springboard that we find the oft-quoted passage from John's gospel, John 3:16 and following:

John 3:16-18 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

The universal and particular grace of God, summed up in just a couple verses. The fact that God loves everyone, while also seeking the individual is astounding, and must have stunned this Pharisee. But interestingly enough, we hear nothing more from him. Oh, Jesus goes on with a few thoughts of light and darkness, acceptance and denial; but Nicodemus is silent, at least as far as John's gospel is concerned. John even moves away from Jesus Himself for a few verses, speaking instead of John the Baptist. That is until chapter 4:

John 4:1-4 Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), ³ He left Judea and went away again into Galilee. ⁴ And He had to pass through Samaria.

Jesus decides to move from Judea to Galilee (*South to North*), but the land of Samaria lay in between. Oh, a good Jew may dodge this land "on the other side of the tracks," but the straightest path would take one directly through it. And this is what Jesus and His disciples did, leading them directly on course to Sychar (*the home of Jacob's well*). It was at this point that Jesus encountered someone who was the polar-opposite of Nicodemus.

We're told that Jesus was "wearied from His journey," and was resting near this well. It was mid-day, long after most women in the city would have gathered water. But as Jesus rested, He noticed a lone woman, coming to the well to gather water. And not put off by either her gender, or her apparent status, He approached her:

John 4:7-9 There came a woman of Samaria to draw water.

Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." ⁸ For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. ⁹ Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

Nicodemus and this Samaritan woman, just miles between them, are worlds apart. "*The best of times and the worst of times... we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...*" But yet, both were equally significant to Jesus, something not lost on this woman. She knew her place, and could distinguish Jesus' status at a glance. But yet, here He was, approaching her...speaking to her...respectfully appealing to her! But was this really a conversation about water? No.

John 4:10 Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

Just as Jesus answered the deepest longing in Nicodemus' heart, so now He confronted the woman's deepest need. Nicodemus longed for the truth about Jesus, his heart desired spiritual understanding and renewal. Similarly, this Samaritan woman's soul longed for refreshing, forgiveness, and resurrection. Both longed for more, for answers this world could never provide. Nicodemus has risen to the heights of spiritual status and still thought he might miss God. The woman had failed in all she attempted (relationally), and her life was a mess. But both their hearts ached for that which only Jesus' Kingdom could satisfy.

"If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." - C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

And the answer to both their longings would eventually be spoken to the women in verses 22-26:

John 4:22-26 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵ The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." ²⁶ Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

And from what we can tell, both lives were restored and renewed.

John 4:28-30 So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, ²⁹ "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?" ³⁰ They went out of the city, and were coming to Him.

John 19:39-40 Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. (*see also John 7:47ff*)

The best of times, the worst of times...the age of wisdom, the age of foolishness. But though most are "going direct the other way," God has promised that anyone who believes and trusts in Jesus Christ will "go directly to heaven."